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ENGLISH IN THE
HIGH SCHOOL

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ENGLISH IN THE HIGH SCHOOL.

In an address delivered before the State Teachers' Association last April our State Superintendent said: "A very large per cent of the material contained in text-books and taught children is useless. It should be supplanted by useful material. We require children to spell 20,000 words found in the spelling books, 15,000 of which are never used in a written communication, and are therefore of no value. I am inclined to believe that the percentage of dead timber in most of the other subjects is fully as high." I think the Superintendent is undoubtedly right in his contention. Speaking for the subject of English, in which we are concerned at present, I am convinced that our spelling books, our grammars, and our rhetorics contain much material that has little practical value either for the pupil who goes out from the school into life or for the pupil who goes from the school to the university for advanced work. The boy or girl who habitually spells, in a correct manner, 5,000 of the English words most frequently used in writing has a good working basis in language as far as English orthography is concerned. The principles of grammar which the average pupil will find of practical use in life, or in further work in English or other languages in college, can be stated and illustrated within 100 pages. And the theory of rhetoric which is put into practical use can be given within 25 pages. These figures represent, to be sure, minimum essentials. But they give a fair idea of the useless material contained in the numerous text-books our students attempt to master. One very important problem in English teaching, therefore, is to determine what things are essential and to eliminate those things which are unessential.

Not only are we attempting to teach much that is of little practical value, but we are wasting our energies, as well as those of our pupils, in tiresome and useless repetition of subject-matter. For example, we attempt to teach pupils to spell the same list of words in the elementary schools, in the high schools, and in the universities; and we attempt to drill students on the same principles of grammar at two or three different periods

in the elementary schools, and then force them to take another course in grammar in the high school. Aside from wasting time, repetition effects the loss of spontaneous interest in a subject which is so essential to real progress in all educational work. The pupil cannot believe, as he goes over the same ground in the various grades, that he is getting anywhere; and his parents share this feeling with him. What is the effect of this? I believe that much of the dropping out of pupils from the schools is due to this condition alone. I believe, furthermore, that many of those who remain in school feel that they are not receiving adequate preparation for life. Two things, then, we should do at once in our work in English. We should eliminate from our text-books the "dead timber" which they contain; and we should organize our work in such a way as to avoid wearisome and useless repetition.

With these ideals in mind, let us consider the work in English in the high school. This work, as we know, consists of composition and rhetoric, literature, grammar, and spelling. I shall limit this paper to a discussion of the aims and organization of these subjects in the high school course.

First, what are the aims in teaching composition and rhetoric? Briefly stated, they are: (1) to give the pupil further training in the mechanics of writing; (2) to give him increasing power in oral and written speech; (3) to help him to think more clearly and accurately; and (4) to develop in him a fuller appreciation of good literature and increasing interest in the world in which he lives. A brief exposition of the meaning and significance of these aims may not be out of place.

Under the mechanics of writing we may include neatness and legibility of manuscript, correct spelling and punctuation, correct use of language, proper placing of the material on the page—in a word, all outward means of making the thought quickly and easily understood. This part of the work is highly important; the work, moreover, has a decided practical value, because efficiency in it is the first and often the only requirement made of boys and girls in the business world. Pupils should be drilled in the mechanics of writing until they *habitually* write legibly and neatly, spell and punctuate correctly, avoid the common

errors of speech, and place their work to the best advantage on the written page. To do this work effectively the teacher should require of his pupils short but frequent compositions; he should read these papers carefully and indicate on the margins or elsewhere the mechanical errors; and he should require his pupils to rewrite their papers and to correct the mistakes which he has indicated. The high school teacher cannot drill his pupils too much or too carefully on the mechanics of writing. This work should be thoroughly done not only because of the emphasis which business men place upon it but because *the pupil must master this work now or never*. If a student does not habitually write neatly and spell correctly when he enters college or goes out into life he will, in all probability, never write neatly and spell correctly: his habits have been formed and cannot easily be changed.

But the successful teacher of composition does not stop with drilling his pupils in the mechanics of writing. His constant aim, also, is to give them greater power in oral and written speech. The masterpieces used for models, the theory of rhetoric, every exercise and theme will be used as a means of giving them increasing power in clear, correct, and accurate expression. The teacher should remember that *his work is tested not by what his pupils know about the modes or the principles of rhetoric, but by their ability to express their thoughts*. Can they construct clear and correct sentences? Can they write clear and interesting paragraphs? Can they express exactly what they mean with ease and readiness? This is the test, and this is an important aim in composition.

But this power to express oneself clearly, accurately, and easily is the result of clear and accurate thinking. In fact, there can be no clear writing until there is clear thinking; one cannot speak or write accurately until one thinks accurately. A course in composition, therefore, is a course in logic. It is valuable largely because it develops the student's power to think straight; it forces him to recall past experiences, to collect new facts, to analyze, weigh, and compare things, and on the basis of all this evidence to construct or create new ideas. The real teacher of composition, therefore, emphasizes the thought quite as much as he does the form; he is as much interested in what his pupils

say as he is in the manner in which they say it: indeed, his first efforts are to get his pupils to think in order that they may get something to say. One aim, then, in the teaching of composition is to help students to think clearly and accurately. The course in composition should contribute as much toward the development of clear and logical thinking as any other subject in the curriculum.

The fourth aim suggested is to develop in the pupil a fuller appreciation of good literature and increasing appreciation of the fullness of life. This aim is frequently lost sight of by the teacher of composition. To be sure, it can not be measured as easily as the three aims just considered. But if composition is taught successfully the pupil will appreciate more fully the great masterpieces, and he will see new meaning in life and in external nature. The mere fact that he can construct a good sentence or paragraph will help him to value aright the sentence and paragraph structure of Macaulay and Stevenson. So also a description of a character from life or of some phase of external nature, and the narration of events that happen every day, will increase his interest in the world in which he lives. Writing about things gives one a fuller realization and appreciation of the things themselves.

So much for the aims in teaching rhetoric and composition. What are the aims in teaching literature? First of all, the aim is to give the pupil an understanding and appreciation of some of the great masterpieces of the language. The teacher may hope to realize this aim not by rhapsodizing about the beauty of literature, or by analyzing its technique, or by tracing the history of its literary forms and movements; he can realize it only by making the student see and appreciate the *meaning* of the masterpiece, by having him understand the experiences and ideals of life set forth. A second aim is to give the pupil—through a study of the characters, the philosophy, and the ideals of the masterpieces—a broader and saner view of life, a heightened sense of the demands of life, and higher and nobler ideals of living. Another aim is to develop, through the mental images and emotional appeal of literature, the imagination and emotions of the pupil. Such training is of inestimable value in the development of originality, initiative, and power.

A final aim is to help the pupil to *realize himself*, to see in the poem or the story his own ideals of beauty and conduct and the possibilities of his own life.

These aims the successful teacher of literature may secure in his work if he will teach the right masterpieces and teach them in the right way. The nature of the masterpiece is to be determined, of course, by the nature of the pupil he is dealing with. In every case it must be within the pupil's interest, range of understanding, sympathy, and feeling. We should not, for example, make the mistake of following the historical method if by doing so we are studying poems or prose masterpieces which are beyond the experience and understanding of the pupil. Many high school principals have told me that the college entrance requirements contain masterpieces that are entirely outside the interest and experience of high school pupils. Such masterpieces should, of course, be eliminated from the high school course of study; the high school through its experience, and not the college, must decide what masterpieces are suitable for the boys and girls of high school grade and maturity.

The work in grammar is no less important than the work in literature and composition. If the course in language in the elementary grades has been organized so as to avoid tiresome and useless repetition of drill on the same principles, the high school pupil will welcome a course in formal grammar. It will give him a comprehensive view of the whole subject and enable him to see the importance and relationship of the various parts. Furthermore, he is now able to grasp, as a result of his maturer judgment, the scientific principles of the subject. A knowledge of grammar is valuable for several reasons. In the first place, it is an aid in composition; the pupil who is ignorant of the principles of grammar cannot understand the construction of the English sentence. In the second place, it is an aid in deciding questions of usage; the student who is unfamiliar with usage cannot correct intelligently his own errors of speech. In the third place, it is helpful in the interpretation of literature; much light is often thrown on a difficult passage in prose or poetry as a result of the knowledge of grammatical principles. And, finally, it is an excellent preparation for the study of such languages as Latin, German, and French. The drill in grammar should be

thorough, and the pupil should master the essentials so well that he will be able to make application of them in all future work.

The subject of spelling does not properly belong in the high school course. The high school will never reach the point, perhaps, where a weak speller will not slip in. But the drill in spelling should be so well done in the grades that 95 per cent of the pupils who pass up into the high school will be able to spell, automatically and habitually, the words which are most generally used in composition. At present, it seems to be necessary to drill high school pupils in spelling outside of the work in other courses in English. The aim in this work is an eminently practical one: to drill the pupil on the words which are most frequently used in ordinary writing (for example, those found in the ordinary newspapers and magazines), and to drill him so thoroughly on these words that he will always spell them correctly in his written work.

We have considered the aims in teaching composition and rhetoric, literature, grammar, and spelling in the high school. Let us consider for a moment the organization of all this work. The Department of Education proposes, as I understand it, the following plan of work in English for the high school course of study: Throughout the eighth grade the work is to be literature (four times a week); composition, based on the masterpieces studied in literature (once a week); and spelling (a separate period of twenty minutes, five times a week). In the first half, of the ninth grade, the work of the eighth grade is to be continued; in the second half of the ninth grade the work will be formal grammar (four times a week), composition correlated with the grammar (once a week), and spelling continued as above. In the first half of the tenth grade the work will be literature (four times a week), composition based on the literature (once a week), and spelling as above; in the second half of the tenth grade the work will be rhetoric (four times a week), composition in connection with the theory of rhetoric (once a week), and spelling as before. Throughout the eleventh grade the work will be literature in connection with the history of literature (four times a week), composition based on the literature studied (once a week), and spelling as in previous years. This plan for the high school work in English seems to me to be an admirable one, and ought to bring excellent results in securing the aims which I have indicated in this paper.

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